

Whose Earth Is It?
Genesis 1:24-2:3
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John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

Text: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof..." Psalm 24:1

Several years ago an attorney was researching the title to a piece of property in Louisiana for a loan from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. He had tracked the records back to 1803. But the Government wanted more than that and so he consulted a lawyer in New Orleans.

According to a UPI wire service story the attorney replied: "Sir: Louisiana was purchased by the United States from France in 1803. The title to the land was acquired by France by right of conquest from Spain. The land came into the possession of Spain by right of discovery made in 1492 by a sailor named Christopher Columbus, who had been granted the privilege of seeking a new route to India by Queen Isabella. The good Queen took the precaution of securing a blessing of the Pope of Rome upon the voyage before she sold her jewels to help Columbus. Now the Pope, as you know, is the emissary of Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God, and God, it is commonly accepted, made the world.

"Therefore, I believe it is safe to presume that He also made that part of the United States called Louisiana and I hope to hell you're satisfied." (Wallace E. Fisher, A New Climate for Stewardship, p. 19-20).

The attorney's strong opinion that God is the original owner of the real estate in question is an idea of significant historic precedent and emotional appeal. In a sense it is an innocuous idea: who would dispute it? Or who, on the other hand, really thinks it matters?

I think thoughtful historians will one day record the fact that somewhere in the twentieth century a lot of people stopped believing that it mattered much whether or not there was a God: that the particular age adopted a world view which eliminated God, and that while people went on affirming their beliefs, the existence or non-existence of God had very little to do with the way people lived and behaved.

Dr. Louis Patrick put it this way: "One of the apparent illusions that our age has dispelled is just this: 'The earth is the Lord's'. Now even Eskimos file real estate claims with mineral rights."

The twentieth century, I am suggesting, seen in retrospect, will be the time when people stopped believing that God, if He exists at all, has anything to do with His creation: the time when humanity seized sole ownership of the earth, for better or worse, good or ill.

And then we come to Thanksgiving: the annual harvest festival in our culture and we have a monumental theological problem: whom are we going to thank, for what and why? The dilemma is reflected in the modest story of a man hoeing his garden. A pious soul walking by observed: "I see God has blessed you in your labors." The perspiring gardener replied, "You should have seen this garden when God had it by Himself."

That's the problem. We have seen humanity, in our time, learn to do those things which were once attributed to God. Our Progenitors may have given God the gratitude for a good crop. We know that the secret is chemical fertilizer.

While in church we may affirm that "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof", but everyone knows that we own the place and science, not theology, is the discipline which will help us in the exercising of our ownership.

But at Thanksgiving we find ourselves participating in ritualized gratitude, which if it has any authenticity about it at all, will contain a very radical and far-reaching belief in God as creator. Think for a minute about your Thanksgiving prayer. As you and I sit down at a table laden with good food produced by a highly mechanized agri-business, harvested, cleaned, packaged and marketed by a whole multitude of people, we will give God thanks. In addition, we will thank Him for clothing and shelter; for freedom and health and family and friends. And in that prayer we will be making a very profound theological affirmation; namely, that He has had something to do with it; that the creator has a great deal to do with His creation; an idea held up in the very first phrase of the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth."

It is an affirmation that goes deeply to the heart of the Biblical tradition. I read this morning from the first and second chapters of the Book of Genesis. The accounts of creation in Genesis perplex us at times with their apparently detailed description of what happened and when. Our error, of course, is in reading it as an account of an event which happened at a point in time long ago. It is no such thing. It is, rather, a statement about God, God's relationship to His creation and humanity's role in that creation. The Creedal statement that God is Maker of Heaven and Earth is the Church's affirmation that the content of Genesis 1 and 2 is part of the structure of Christian belief.

It is in the Creed because, frankly, western civilization has never been comfortable with the older, Genesis, view of things. At the time the Creed was being formulated one of the dominant ideas in the western world was Gnosticism. The Gnostics borrowed heavily from the Greeks and believed that all of reality was divided into two realms: the physical and the spiritual. The highest plane of life a person could achieve was the totally spiritual: religion was viewed as the disciplined removal of self from the physical or material. One of the Gnostics, a Christian by the name of Marcion, taught that there were two gods: the God of the Old Testament, the God who created everything in the first place - and the God of the New Testament, the father of Jesus Christ, the Redeemer God. By effectively divorcing the ideas of creation and redemption, Marcion brought Gnosticism to its logical conclusion. His ideas were very popular and if you reflect on it for a minute you will discover that they still are. We don't use the term Gnostic and Marcion is not quoted from any pulpits I know of, at least by name. But the idea is still alive and well that to be spiritual is to be non-physical; that spiritual people aren't interested in the pleasures of the flesh; that Christian folk are called to restrain and, if possible, ignore the appetites which are notoriously a part of the body. The idea is still current in some circles that God made somewhat of an error when He gave us bodies in the first place.

Well, Genesis says He created it - all of it. And not only did He create it, He liked it; He called it good - humanity included. The Creed says simply, "Maker of Heaven and Earth." That, I would suggest, is a very powerful idea.

Let's pursue it for a moment in terms of its impact on the way life is lived: First, as it affirms the basic goodness of the physical, tangible, sensual. One writer comments: "It is now permissible to enjoy a properly legalized sex life with

a clear Christian conscience, and art and dance are beginning to find their way back into the Sanctuary. But in spite of these minor steps forward there remains a deep-seated suspicion of the carnal enthroned in the Christian understanding of history and salvation." (Sam Keen, To a Dancing God, p.142).

Consider the fact, for instance, that in the matter of sex education the strongest opponents in most communities were churches. If it wasn't dirty, it certainly wasn't holy. And so we preserved ignorance and superstition and wrong ideas, and inflicted incalculable suffering on men and women because of our suspicion that God's creation wasn't all that good. Or consider that very curious, but totally Gnostic, position that sex is obscene but killing is simply unpleasant. I'm not advocating pornography on television, nor that public viewing of private sex is in any way a good idea. I am suggesting that when a person is killed in front of a television watching child, he or she has seen something obscene, something totally in conflict with the Creedal affirmation that God is the creator of Heaven and Earth and human beings. That is the first point of impact. The Creed invites us to rejoice in the goodness of the physical, the tangible, the material, and to enjoy the creation God has put at our disposal.

The second impact is in the area of our relationship to the rest of creation. In the past two decades we have finally begun to come to grips with an important fact: - the human race is gradually making the earth uninhabitable. For thousands of years we have been using the resources and now they're about to run out. As a part of our industrialization and urbanization we have been tampering with the very ecosystem which supports life. You know the horror stories as well as I do. We have strewn our garbage from the very top of the atmosphere to the bottom of the ocean. As we woke up to what we were doing some very scholarly people laid the blame on the Judeo-Christian tradition. It's in the Genesis, they said, that humanity found the philosophic basis for exploiting the natural world. But a closer look at our lesson this morning reveals that the environmental crisis is a result of human sin, not Biblical teaching. In fact, in the Bible, God is the owner of the earth: human beings have a special role in creation as stewards - trustees. We are not given carte blanche. In fact, our job is to manage the operation for the owner.

It is, I am suggesting, a theological issue with behavioral implications for every one of us. We are the ones responsible. It is terribly wrong to regard the environment as a concern not important to Christian faith. That position, which is not unpopular, may be our most serious sin.

Jesus talked about this matter of ownership in a memorable section of the Sermon on the Mount. "Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink...Look at the birds...consider the lilies...seek first His Kingdom." Jesus knew that the major issue about the role of humanity in the economy of creation would be ownership. He knew the truth of the Genesis idea that men and women want to be the owners, and that the urge to acquire and have and make the rules would forever be our original sin.

He did not say, by the way, that we should pay no attention to providing for ourselves: what He did say was, "Don't be anxious", don't get ensnared in debilitating, selfish anxiety over acquiring and accumulating. Allow God to be the owner.

He suggested that we were made for more than the ideal life Madison Avenue describes for us with vulgar monotony. Jesus taught that living in a way that

acknowledges God's ownership of creation and God's continuing providence in creation is the stance of freedom and peace and wholeness.

The third area of impact has to do with how the believer regards the whole world. The philosopher Lessing once said that if he had one question to ask the great Egyptian Sphinx it would be, "Is the universe friendly?" Now you and I would not put it that way. But deep within us we harbor a basic way of viewing the world and the future and for many it is a position of fear, anxiety, dread. We answer Lessing's question in the negative. But the Creed invites us to reconsider. William Barclay puts it beautifully: "We live in what is ultimately and essentially a friendly universe. However, hurting life can and may be, it is not intended to break us but to make us; at the heart of the universe is love." (The Apostles' Creed for Everyman, p.55).

It is in that spirit that Thanksgiving began. In the winter of 1621 William Bradford wrote in his diary, "Behold, now another providence of God. A ship comes into the harbor." Now Bradford knew, as we know, that the ship came into the harbor because its timbers were sturdy enough to withstand the rigors of the North Atlantic, and because the winds had been favorable, and because the captain was skilled with his sextant and charts. Yet he called it a providence of God, and in so doing was making the same affirmation that we will make when we thank God for a butterball turkey or when we say simply, "I believe in God - the maker of Heaven and Earth." Those hearty souls who celebrated first along the coast of Massachusetts really didn't have much for which to be grateful. They were alive, but only barely. The corn had grown and they wouldn't starve in their second winter. But they had not settled in a land of milk and honey. Their Thanksgiving, I have always felt, was more than a celebration of the harvest; more an affirmation of the friendliness of the universe, of the providence of a God who would stand with them in the good days and the bad days; an affirmation that God is - and always will be - "Maker of Heaven and Earth". The first Thanksgiving was an affirmation of a deep trust in God's continuing care for His creation; His loving and creative ownership of the earth and His good will toward all of His creatures.

As we give thanks this year, may we do so in that spirit. We believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth;

"The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and those that dwell therein.

For it was He who founded it upon the seas and planted it firm upon the waters beneath."

Amen.

Father, we stand in awe and reverence before Your creation. You have given us everything. Now teach us to be grateful. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.